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# Karl Barth's Mozart: Lessons for Christian Music Education

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**Abstract**
The author considers Barth's thoughful and emotional engagement with Mozart's music and argues that "Christian music educators are in a special place for raising similar questions about music's contributions to human flourishing, its roles in personal progress, and the mysteries of common grace in which God's glory can be sounded from even unknowing servants."

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# Karl Barth's Mozart

## Lessons for Christian Music Education

**BY JOHN MACINNIS**

Despite my title, "Karl Barth's Mozart," I should say that I am not here directly concerned with Barth or Mozart so much as what I propose are lessons for Christian music education. Specifically, I consider Barth's thoughtful and emotional engagement with Mozart's music and argue that Christian music educators are in a special place for raising similar questions about music's contributions to human flourishing, its roles in personal progress, and the mysteries of common grace in which God's glory can be sounded from even unknowing servants.

Karl Barth is most commonly associated with so-called neo-orthodox theology. As an acclaimed theologian, Barth was published widely and not without controversy; for example, his views on the historicity of scripture resulted in strong opposition from American pastors. He lived from 1886 to 1968 and worked primarily in his native Switzerland with a vast output of works ranging from commentaries to his mammoth, multi-volumed *Church Dogmatics*.

It may not be common knowledge that Barth was also an ardent lover of music. He played the piano, reportedly had a fine baritone voice, and began each day with Mozart. In his own words, Barth's dedication to Mozart began as a child when he heard his father play an excerpt from *The Magic Flute*; he responded, "He's the one!" Through his life, Barth bought books on and recordings of Mozart's music, and in his final years, he penned several essays for the bicentennial of Mozart's birth. Barth's essays on Mozart are now translated into English and published in a slim volume that I recently assigned to my upper-level music history students at Dordt College. Summarizing his love for Mozart, Barth once went so far as to say, "I even have to confess that if I ever get to heaven, I would first of all seek out Mozart and only then inquire after Augustine, St. Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher."

Regarding Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart, what could be said in a short introduction? Perhaps that Mozart in every way resists a short introduction and truly deserves the name Theophilus, or Amadeus in Latin, "Beloved of God." I will say this: Mozart lived at the moment in the eighteenth century when music as the tonal language we know today came sharply into focus, thanks to the establishment of equal temperament tuning and new concepts of musical structure centered on the tonic—its establishment, disruption, and inevitable return. And so, quite literally, along with Haydn and Beethoven, Mozart established and expressed the clear, coherent language of musical tonality we call the classical style.

In the following we will consider several quotations by Barth that I have organized topically.

## Mozart at Play

> Our daily bread must also include playing. I hear Mozart—both younger and older—at play. But play is something so lofty and demanding that it requires mastery. And in Mozart I hear an art of playing as I hear it in no one else. Beautiful playing presupposes an intuitive, childlike awareness of the essence or center—as also the beginning and the end—of all things. It is from this center, from this beginning and end, that I hear Mozart create his music. I can hear those boundaries which he imposed upon himself because it was precisely this discipline that gave him joy. And when I hear him, it gladdens, encourages, and comforts me as well (Barth 16–17).

In this quotation Barth focuses on Mozart exercising the God-given ability that Barth calls "play." This play is described in three ways, as "mastery," as "art," and as contained within the established bounds of a perceived "reality." In the case of mastery, Mozart's music evidences an investment of time and effort. Mozart, of course, had been taught thoroughly and expertly by his father, Leopold Mozart, himself a court musician. But his drive to understand, exercise, achieve, and "play" came from within. We know this because of his fierce, uncompromising work ethic as recorded by his contemporaries. Indeed, Mozart gave himself to music completely. And yet, being so versed in music and such a master of its craft, Mozart never burdens his hearers. His brilliance does not necessarily result in more complexity, but in a more precise and meaningful simplicity.

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I think this degree of freedom, earned by hard work, is something we hope to demonstrate for and elicit from our music students. Because the pleasure of observing expert craftsmanship is not limited to Mozart's music; we can point it out to students as we teach them to read scores written recently. And, as they gain facility with their instruments and voices through successive grades, we can point out the subtle transition from mastery to art. By art, I mean here the playful, spirited execution of a mastered skill. We might say that it is through mastery that the fun begins.

Finally, Barth's words concerning Mozart's "awareness" of reality suggest a lot to me. For example, I think a musical "awareness" indicates coming to terms with our existence as creatures and acknowledging the overruling and underpinning presence of God, his purposes for music generally, and the essential nature of sound in our stewardship of it. As music educators, we certainly want the Christmas concert to come off well, but we also desire insight for our students, insight that seeks to live and flourish within God's norms for who we are and what we do. Such restrained action actually is liberating and a source for gladness, encouragement, and comfort.

For example, consider a middle school Christmas concert. It's a fundraiser and a confirmation for parents that those tuition payments are worthwhile. It's a performance, an opportunity to demonstrate skill before an audience. And it's good fun. What we don't want lost on those students and their parents, though, is a sense of the humanness of what is happening: of working together on a shared task, of raising voices around a topic of worth and beauty, of individual

training and restraint so that the group as a whole prospers. We don't want the audience to miss the power that lies in reading, interpreting, understanding, and communicating a musical text. We want the sanctifying presence of God to be acknowledged in the preceding weeks of solfège drills and vocal warm-ups, because God made the principles of sound we shape and God made our voices. Finally, we want a sense of moral rightness to resound in their hearts, that what they sing and sound is true, honest, and just.

## Common Grace

> Mozart's music is not, in contrast to that of Bach, a message, and not, in contrast to that of Beethoven, a personal confession . . . Mozart does not wish to say anything: he just sings and sounds. Thus he does not force anything on the listener, does not demand that he make any decisions or take any positions; he simply leaves him free . . . On one occasion he called death man's true best friend, and he thought daily of death, as his works plainly reveal. But he does not dwell on it unduly; he merely lets us discover it. Nor does he *will* to proclaim the praise of God. He just does it—precisely in that humility in which he himself is, so to speak, only the instrument with which he allows us to hear what he hears: what surges at him from God's creation, what rises in him, and must proceed from him (Barth 37–38).

For Barth, Mozart simply does what he was made to do; he sings and sounds without the burden of a personal confession or a dogmatic proclamation. Said differently, Barth believed that death and God are both present in Mozart's music, but we listeners are left free to come upon them naturally, without a sermon. It is almost as if Barth regarded Mozart's music in a way similar to the created order, which declares God's glory while hinting urgently at our dilemma and only hope. In another place, Barth described hearing both "no" and "yes" in Mozart, but with a stronger, hopeful "yes" that conquers, in the end. He wrote: "What occurs in Mozart is rather a glorious upsetting of the balance, a turning in which the light rises and the shadows fall, though without disappearing, in which joy overtakes sorrow without extinguishing it, in which the Yes rings louder than the ever-present No" (55). For Barth, the "yes" does not drown out the "no" of fallenness and sorrow in a triumphalistic manner, and, in this way, the study of music, as all study should, affirms our place and action in a fallen world but always under the lordship of Christ.

I titled this section "Common Grace," and while it is true that this is not a term Barth used in his writing about Mozart. I think it applies. In Mozart's music, Barth heard God's sustaining care for the world, a limiting of sin and its effects, and another subtle declaration of ultimate right and wrong. Additionally, Mozart declares God's glory as a matter of course; for Barth, he is a sort of unknowing vessel that God graciously fills with skill, perception, desire to achieve, and opportunity to learn.

## A Call to Freedom

> Mozart's music renders the true *vox humana* through the whole scale of its possibilities—un-subdued, but also undistorted and without convulsions. The true listener may regard himself as also called to this freedom—to see himself as the person he really is: as the cunning Basilio and the gentle Cherubino, as the hero Don Giovanni and the coward Leporello, as the tender Pamina and the raging Queen of the Night, as the all-forgiving countess and the terrifying, jealous Electra, as the wise Sarastro and the foolish Papageno. They lie hidden in all of us (54–55).

Again we read how Mozart's music voices the human condition clearly and without exaggeration. The difference now is that Barth also hears a call for us to live in such freedom—the freedom to regard ourselves truly, to know ourselves as we are. We are called to strip away pretentions to a single persona and find an inner sense of balance and proportion. To be clear, Barth does not mean indifferent neutrality. Rather, in this balance there is a turning from sorrow to joy as there is in Mozart's music, and finding that point of balance, that point of turning, is the sort of personal progress we hope for all our students.

The question, "Who am I?" is a natural one, and it is often answered by our students with their music. But defining ourselves by our music can be problematic. For example, there is the problem of "using" music as opposed to "receiv-

ing" it, making statements about who I am as opposed to living in the freedom of knowing who I am.

So how can we as Christian music educators help our students receive music in the way Barth models for us? Certainly the sort of music we program and rehearse are factors. What we have our students play informs how and if they can receive other music. We can model for them proper postures for a thoughtful, engaged reception in how we speak about as well as conduct, hear, and share music. For example, is rehearsal time more to ensure a successful performance and less to humbly receive a work of art?

Finally, for Barth, Mozart's music is a call ultimately to get beyond ourselves. He wrote that when composing, Mozart's aim was "to give voice, quite oblivious to the important and the trivial experiences of his life, to that small part of the universe of sound in which he dwelt. What then came forth was always, and still is, an invitation to the listener to venture just a little out of the snail's shell of his own subjectivity" (49–50).

Barth goes on to explain how the majority of years in Mozart's short adult life were hard and painful, but that his music never became an avenue for self-disclosure. Barth perceives that Mozart was able to get beyond, and live beyond his immediate subjective context for the purpose of something more meaningful. For Barth, this sort of generous, outward-oriented living can be helped and hindered by our music; he explains how the pressures of modern life demand, more and more, the best music, music that lets us be old and young, music that lets us work and rest. Barth calls this quality the "objectivity" of Mozart's music, and although we may not agree with his choice of Mozart specifically (Barth's Mozart may not be your Mozart), the sorts of things Barth sought and prized in Mozart's music are the sorts of things we should seek and prize as well.

As Christian music educators, it is our calling to initiate our students into the joys of music performance, to share with them our rich musical traditions, to guide them in thinking about music, and to hope that they think as Christians. As it relates to music, true human flourishing embraces both theory and praxis, and Barth's Mozart challenges us to deep, thoughtful engagement with music—regardless of whether Mozart or Mumford & Sons is under discussion.

## Work Cited

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